

Nico Roymans, **Ethnic Identity and Imperial Power. The Batavians in the Roman Empire**. Amsterdam Archaeological Studies, volume 10. Amsterdam University Press, 2004. 277 pages, 114 illustrations.

This elegantly written and lavishly illustrated volume both records the latest stage in a long program of research, and also makes a genuinely original contribution that demands to be read by all researching Iron Age and early imperial societies in Rome's western provinces.

As a study focused on the archaeology and history of the populations of the lower Rhine and their encounter with Rome, it represents a continuation of work that Roymans and his collaborators have been conducting for two decades now. Their work marries the traditional strengths of field-work and artefact studies, often conducted in less than ideal conditions, with interpretative techniques borrowed from anthropology. Earlier contributions include Roymans' own 1990 thesis 'Tribal Societies in Northern Gaul'; a series of studies funded by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek since 1989 through its Pionier Project 'Power and Elite' (some published in the collective volumes 'Images of the Past' and 'From the Sword to the Plough', both co-edited by Roymans); Ton Derks' important 'Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices'; and also a good deal of fieldwork, notably the excavations of the temple site at Empel. The present volume is sole-authored by Roymans: this contributes to its thematic unity, but it draws on the work of a team. Roymans is careful to credit at each stage of his argument the many collaborators whose studies have contributed to this project, and in some senses the book comprises a series of discrete studies, bound together by a central argument. Two are numismatic, on gold triskelos Scheers thirty-one coins and on triquetrum coinages respectively. Two are historical, dealing with aspects of the conquest and the juridical-political status of the pre-Flavian Batavian polity. One deals with three pieces of monumental art. About one third of the book consists of a report and analysis of the mass of archaeological material from the site or sites of Kessel-Lith, largely recovered during dredging operations. The remainder of the book develops an argument about ethnicity, specifically about the origins and evolution of the Batavian people.

It is that discussion of ethnogenesis – in which an anthropological approach draws together archaeological, numismatic, epigraphic and historical studies – that constitutes the real originality of the project. Roymans draws on a range of modern studies of ethnicity to develop a set of working hypotheses. Ethnic groups are groups whose members »consider themselves and are considered by others as culturally distinctive«. Moreover their unity is formed during relations with others and always open to challenge. The unity of an ethnic group is constructed ideologically, it often involves invented traditions and myths of origins, and is situatio-

nal in the sense that individuals invoke membership of different groups to which they belong, depending on the circumstances.

This social constructionist view of ethnicity has its roots in a kind of social theory developed in opposition to essentialist and ahistorical notions of ethnicity which have often been linked to nationalist and even racist agendas. »Ruretanian for the Ruretanians«, as Ernest Gellner used to sum up the nationalist credo, depends on a notion of Ruretanians as an objectively real people, with origins lost in the mists of time and wholly distinctive from their neighbours not just in habit, taste and custom but also in moral nature or character. Claims of common biological ancestry are not necessary but are common to that version. Roymans shares the social theorists' caution about such concepts when he asserts the subjective nature of ethnicity, and its temporary and contingent nature. Ethnicities are formed (in ethnogenesis), develop dynamically over time and eventually pass away (in what is now sometimes termed ethnonemesis). There are, however, difficulties with the social constructionist approach, at least in its more extreme forms. The more we regard ethnicity as contingent and situational the more difficult it is to account those very long lasting ethnic groups, or why some people will maintain their allegiance to ethnicities long after they have become uncomfortable, disadvantageous or downright hazardous. The future of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Europe with its many diasporic populations would be easier if individuals and minority populations were always happy to shift into more easily accommodated ethnic modes as their situations changed. But there is little sign that the alienation of minorities is a transitory or transitional experience. Examples abound from antiquity to the modern day, of ethnic minorities persisting in defiance of the prejudice or hostility of surrounding populations. If adaptation and accommodation is so easy, why are there still Muslims in Bosnia or Palestinian Christians? To answer that ethnic affiliation matters more to many than their immediate economic or political advantage does seem to raise problems for the notion of ethnicity as a convenient mask or strategem. To be sure the question of how apparently labile social identities seem on occasion to become locked together with much more durable personal and psychological identities is not really a problem for Roymans' purposes. But those working in the eastern provinces might well ask themselves why Greeks, Jews and some others held on so tenaciously to identities that sometimes marginalised them in relation to Rome, rather than follow the more relaxed, (or more strategic?) pattern of western populations. Equally, those of us concerned with western populations might ask, even if we cannot answer, why pre-Roman identities were so readily abandoned in so many cases. Why did it matter less to be an Eburone than a Greek? What the social constructionist model of ethnicity does offer Roymans is an approach to prehistoric identities that does not depend on culture-historical equations of spe-

cific archaeological facies with particular peoples. What is really remarkable about this book is the subtlety of the picture Roymans has been able to develop without claiming to have identified »Batavian pottery«, »Batavian brooches« or the like.

To this general theory of ethnicity, Roymans adds insights drawn from other studies notably John Creighton's important ›Coinage and Power in Late Iron Age Britain‹ (Cambridge 2000) and Reinhard Wenskus' rather older ›Stammesbildung und Verfassung: das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes‹ (reprint Stuttgart 1977). From the former, Roymans derives ways to relate coinages to particular peoples and dynasties without returning to now discredited historicising approaches to the Iron Age. He also draws comforting analogies with Creighton's picture of other royal dynasties at the very edge of empire making successful use of Roman symbols and myths to develop a new regal style. From Wenskus, Roymans borrows the idea that in many cases of ethnogenesis it is possible to discern a small core group – a ›Traditionskern‹ – which supplies ethnonym, myths of origin and so on to a more heterogeneous population. Ideas of this kind have been recently applied to archaic Greece. Erich Gruen's recent edited volume ›Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity‹ (Stuttgart 2005) provides a range of examples, including an important paper by Hans-Joachim Gehrke, some of whose earlier work Roymans also draws on. This eclectic use of anthropology, ancient and mediaeval history and archaeological theory is very much Roymans' trademark. In this book, it is deftly combined to tell a clear, and largely convincing, story.

Here is Roymans' Batavian story, in a nutshell. The historical Batavians, as known from the pages of Tacitus' ›Histories‹, originated in a historical moment of ethnogenesis, perhaps at the very end of Caesar's Gallic War. They were formed from a union between local populations, some of them survivors of Caesarian massacres, and a core group originating among the Chatti of the middle Rhine who were perhaps already tied to the Romans by treaty. The creation of this new entity involved little transformation in the material culture of the lower Rhine, and some existing sanctuaries remained in use, but a centre emerged or remained important at Kessel-Lith, a predecessor of both oppidum Batavorum and Noviomagus (modern day Nijmegen). Around these religious and political central places a set of new traditions were woven, probably including descent from Hercules, whose wandering features in many contemporary local traditions in the west and whose worship is well attested in the area, and perhaps also including a mythic role for Julius Caesar himself. This original Batavian population originally included groups like the Cannenefates who would, after the Batavian Revolt during the Flavian civil war, be politically separated from them. From the beginning the Batavians had a special place in the Roman order as suppliers of cavalry, and it is in the context of military service alongside the legions that many dimensions of Batavian

identity was developed. The tombstones of Batavian auxiliaries show their rejection of German and barbarian identities. Back home they were municipalized early and traces of monumental art suggest that first the local royal house and later a more broadly based elite played a leading role in promoting urbanization. The very success of the Batavians in finding a role within the Roman system led to the eventual decline of this ethnic identity, not in a catastrophe but simply through a process where other identities – Roman and Noviomagan – came to be invoked more often.

This account is extremely plausible. It makes excellent sense of the broad continuity of house forms, economic life, ceramic types and some settlements alongside the historical evidence for the appearance of a new people. Numismatic evidence plays a major part in giving the Chatian ›Traditionskern‹ some archaeological expression: the recent great improvements in the chronology of Iron Age coinages allow Roymans to effectively track the core group from the region of the Dünsberg in central Hesse to the lower Rhine. The early date proposed for municipalization looks much more plausible given the recent find of an apparent urban centre at Waldgirmes under construction before the Varian disaster. The end of the story is less clear than the beginning, given the small number of usable inscriptions which are the only way of measuring individual claims about their identity, but this is hardly the focus of this study.

One of the strengths of the way the book is organised is that the individual studies can to a large degree be read in isolation. Roymans is well aware that some must remain more speculative than others which are important contributions in themselves. So chapter six on the Trisquetrum coinage is furnished not only with twenty-two distribution maps, line drawings of coin types, and tabulated information on variations in the silver: copper ratio from lower Rhine finds but also an appendix giving full details of find spots. Those familiar with the publications of the ›Power and Elite‹ project will not be surprised to find this volume documented by a mass of tabulated data, maps, plans and in the case of the monumental sculpture discussed, colour plates as well. Most speculative are the attempts to reconstruct foundation myths for the Batavians. Like Derks' similar discussion of the Remi in his monograph cited above, these investigations are easily the best guesses available but no more than that. The head of Caesar and the Tiberius column from Nijmegen, neither with a very secure context, can be interpreted in many ways. Likewise the fragmentary inscription from Escharen (also discussed in chapter nine) might belong to a ›tabula patronatus‹, but many other interpretations are possible of a bronze on which only the emperor's name can be restored. Discussions of invented traditions do, however, play a very valuable part in the argument as a whole in indicating the kind of ideological activity that must have accompanied components of these changes attested in other media.

Perhaps the most important part of this volume is the discussion in chapter seven of the great body of late La Tène metalwork recovered from dredging at Kessel-Lith. Very little can be said about the structure of this complex site, but the densest amount of material is concentrated along a two kilometres long zone where the Meuse and Waal almost or (as Roymans argues) actually did touch in antiquity. The material includes weaponry, cauldrons, personal equipment and also coins and human skeletal material. At least a part of this must relate to ritual activity, although whether this is to be imagined as one or more major events, like that giving rise to the structures of human bones at Ribemont, or rather as a long period of cult activity more like those at La Tène itself is unclear. Some activity seems datable (largely on the basis of Nauheim fibulae) to the beginning of La Tène D I, that is to the late second century B.C. It remained a centre until the early Augustan period, when architectural fragments suggest the construction of a major early Roman temple. That chronology places the growth of the centre before the Batavian ethnogenesis. If correct then the process is not analogous to those instances known from more recent west African history, when new arrivals imposed a warrior aristocracy on top of existing acephalous societies, and instead the new Chattian arrivals either seized control of the levers of social power in a society already centralised, or else built their polity on the ruins of one only recently destroyed by Roman arms. Roymans suggests we are seeing here developments analogous to those associated with oppida further south at around the same time, and suggests that Kessel-Lith was a major centre of production for coins, glasswork and metalwork. The circumstantial case for seeing the region as participating in similar developments to those that generated oppida in eastern France and southern and western Germany, to the great ditched enclosures of southern Britain and to the monumental central places of Romania is a strong one. That said, the exact nature of what was happening at Kessel-Lith remains conjectural. The idea of it as a centre of production remains essentially an argument from silence. Roymans correctly states there are no other candidates at present. But in this lowland and much altered landscape who knows what other major sites remain to be found?

Whatever does emerge from the next decades of research, its analysis will be deeply indebted to this book. One of the most attractive features of Roymans' work is the easy way in which he not only builds on his previous achievements, but also revises his earlier conclusions when appropriate. At the vanguard of those who in the eighties rewrote late European prehistory beginning from economy and society, Roymans now leads the way in exploring cultural and ideological dimensions of the same material and in this work leads the way in reintegrating historical evidence. The result is a study that is a model for similar projects all over Europe.